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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [CH](#) [KN](#) [KS](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: CANDIDATES OFFER NO GOOD SOLUTION TO EDUCATION  
REFORM

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Education, more specifically the need to get one's child into college, is of great concern to South Korean parents, who spend more than four times the OECD average on education, most of which goes toward private tutoring. The cost and stress of this system make educational reform a perennial campaign issue. The lead conservative candidate, the Grand National Party's (GNP) Lee Myung-bak, and the leading progressive candidate, the United New Democratic Party's (UNDP) Chung Dong-young, have each articulated plans to reform Korea's education system. Many of their goals are the same: increase university autonomy; eliminate the college entrance exam system; and reduce money spent on private (particularly English) education. However, they have outlined very different means for reaching these goals. Korea's education system, clearly in dire need of reform, allows these two candidates to outline different -- though improbable -- fixes. End Summary.

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Quantity of Schools the Means to Quality  
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¶2. (SBU) Lee's education reform plan aims to cut in half parental spending on private tutoring and prevent poverty from being passed down from parents to children by offering quality public education to low income families. Lee proposed building 300 new schools. There would be 50 "meister" high schools, which would train talented students in arts like animation and cooking and in sciences like IT; 100 new private high schools free from government intervention, giving students and faculty free rein to follow diverse principles and creative ideas; and, 150 public boarding high schools for underprivileged students in small cities and farm villages.

¶3. (SBU) For his part, Chung said he would foster and support 300 public high schools in the farming and fishing regions, expand the education budget by 50 percent, and give schools and principals more autonomy in selecting curricula and teachers.

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Down With the Test  
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¶4. (C) Park Chan-mo, Lee Myung-baks' campaign co-chairman for Education, Science, and Technology, recently told poloff

that increasing the autonomy of universities was key to any reform effort. Specifically Lee wants to undo two of President Roh Moo-hyun's "three no's" policies. (Note: Roh Moo-hyun's "three no's" policy calls for no high school rankings, no independent college entrance examinations, and no accepting students into college in exchange for donations.) He wants to lift the ban on the ranking of high schools by their academic performance and end the restriction that bars colleges from conducting their own admission examinations. The third "no," which bars colleges from accepting donations in exchange for admitting students should be debated further, Lee said.

15. (SBU) Lee laid out a three-step plan to ultimately allow universities to implement their own admissions policies. First, reduce the weight that universities must give to the college entrance exam. Second, reduce the number of subjects considered from the current seven to four or six. Third, grant colleges and universities full control over admissions policies by 2012.

16. (SBU) Chung also wants to guarantee the independence of universities and make them free from ministry interference. Chung pledged to abolish the national university entrance exam beginning in 2011 and continue the prohibition against universities using their own admissions tests. Instead, Chung proposed introducing a high school graduation test to replace the current College Scholastic Aptitude Test to put a stronger emphasis on the students' high school records instead of on a one-time exam.

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Improving English Education  
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17. (SBU) Lee said the government must take the initiative in lightening the burden for parents by halving the expense of private English education. (NOTE: Currently half of the USD 15.5 billion spent on education nationwide goes towards private English classes.) Lee pledged to train 3,000 English teachers every year who can conduct classes in English. He also pledged to secure more native speakers as assistant teachers and to take advantage of English-proficient college students. He envisions teachers conducting more high school classes in English, like South Korean universities do.

18. (SBU) Chung said he would establish English language classes at all of the 12,000 elementary and secondary schools across the country if he were elected. English language classes would be conducted mainly as after-school classes using the current school classrooms, and each school would have one native speaker and three English-proficient teachers. Chung vowed to triple the time spent on English lessons in schools. He pledged to abolish the English test of the College Scholastic Ability Test to encourage English verbal -- rather than just written -- skills. The current English test would be replaced by a state-authorized English certification test that would be introduced in 2009.

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Show Me the Money  
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19. (SBU) Lee's aides estimate it would cost KW 72 billion (USD 78 million) in the first year of his presidency and a total of KW 393 billion (USD 429 million) over the next five years to train English teachers, develop English immersion education and send teachers overseas for language training. Lee plans to raise the necessary funds by saving KW 5 trillion (USD 5.5 billion) to KW 6 trillion (USD 6.5 billion) from the government budget, raising special educational funds, and collecting private donations.

110. (SBU) Chung, who vowed to expand the nation's education budget to six percent of GDP by 2012, would rely on more tax revenues earned when Korea's growth returns to 5-6 percent annually as well as a peace dividend achieved through

reducing troop levels on the Korean Peninsula. Chung said it would cost about KW 1.8 trillion (USD 2 billion) every year to run language classes at each school. An additional KW 1.2 trillion (USD 1.3 billion) would be needed to set up facilities, including language labs, during the first year of his term.

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Education Policy Not Deciding Factor  
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¶11. (C) Despite concern and an ongoing debate over education policy, voters are not likely to pick a candidate based on educational reform policy alone. According to Korea Society Opinion Institute Research and Analysis Chief Hahn Gwi-young, people do not vote for education policy because of deep-seated skepticism about the possibility of reforming the system. Hahn told pollsters on November 16 the candidates represented the two main schools of thought about educational reform: opportunity for all (Chung Dong-young's pledge) and more competition and specialization (Lee Myung-bak's plan). Most of the middle class supports Lee's plan. Hangill Research and Consulting director Hong Hyung-sik told emboffs that in polls most people supported Lee's approach, but focus groups expressed concern about the likely increased cost of private tutoring if Lee's reforms were enacted and therefore had little enthusiasm for Lee's plans. Hong noted that it was very difficult to score political points on education and the shrewd politician would avoid the issue. Hahn pointed out the irony that, while the progressive "3-8-6" generation was very pro-reform and supported equal access to education, there was now a bigger gap in access to education, more foreign schools, and more students going overseas to study than ten years ago before the two consecutive progressive administrations.

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Comment  
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¶12. (C) Lee Myung-bak's plan is clearer, especially in giving high schools and universities more discretion in admissions and management. Chung's plan is more in line with the progressive agenda of lowering costs and reducing the enormous differences in prestige and quality between various educational institutions. However, neither plan addresses the underlying problems like the absence of instruction on critical thinking and creativity. Deficiencies in the public schools led Korean parents to spend four times more than the OECD average on education (based on 2003 data), and the same year private education fees accounted for 2.9 percent of GDP, the highest among OECD countries. The frustration for Koreans is that despite the vast amounts of money Korean parents spend on supplementing their children's education, the overall quality of higher education is perceived as inadequate. In reality, not many are looking toward the current crop of presidential candidates to make a difference.

VERSHBOW